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TAGS: [PHUM](#) [PREL](#) [PREF](#) [MO](#) [WI](#)
SUBJECT: MOROCCO GRANTS TRAVEL DOCUMENTS TO WESTERN SAHARA
INDEPENDENCE ACTIVISTS

REF: A. RABAT 41
[1](#)B. 09 RABAT 977
[1](#)C. 09 RABAT 849
[1](#)D. USUN 91

Classified By: Classified By Political Counselor Gregory Thome For Reasons 1.4 (b) and (d)

[1](#)1. (C) SUMMARY: The GOM has returned previously confiscated travel documents to 14 Sahrawi activists. Upon receiving their passports, several promptly departed for Algeria, ostensibly to see relatives in the refugee camps near Tindouf but no doubt also to consult with Polisario officials. Western Sahara-based Sahrawi human rights activists have suggested that the GOM timed the returns as a calculated maneuver designed to mitigate Polisario and Algerian criticism of Morocco's human rights record at the informal UN discussions in Westchester County. Nevertheless, the Embassy has frequently raised the withholding of travel documents and other GOM limitations on Sahrawis' freedom of movement with the government as part of our ongoing human rights dialogues, and we view the returns as a positive step. END SUMMARY.

High Profile Activists Again Free to Travel

[1](#)2. (SBU) Between February 10 and 22, Moroccan authorities in the Western Sahara issued or returned previously confiscated passports, national ID cards, Spanish residency permits and cell phones to at least twelve high-profile Sahrawi pro-independence and human rights activists. On February 11, Djimi Elghalia, Vice-Chairwoman of the Sahrawi Association of Victims of Grave Human Rights Violations (ASVDH) was among the first activists to receive her passport in Laayoune. The following day, officials in Dakhla issued Aatik Brai a passport and returned his national ID card, and also returned national IDs to Sahrawi activists Dadach Mohamed, Messoud Larbi, Sbair Ahmed and Ismaili Brahim. Also on February 12, authorities issued a passport and returned a Spanish residency permit to Khayya Sultana. Sultana's case had gained particular notoriety among Moroccan, Sahrawi and international human rights NGOs because of the fact that she was suffering from a serious eye ailment -- which she alleged was inflicted by Laayoune-based police (Ref A) -- that required medical attention abroad. Upon receiving her documents, Sultana immediately departed for Spain to consult with her doctors.

[1](#)3. (C) Surprisingly, authorities also issued a passport

for the first time in nearly 20 years to prominent pro-independence advocate Brahim Sabbar. Sabbar spent a total more than 10 years in Moroccan jails, and Sahrawi celebrations to mark his most recent release, in June 2008, were marked by violent confrontations with police. International human rights NGOs frequently cited Sabbar's case as an obvious GOM limitation on Sahrawis' freedom of movement. In response to periodic Embassy inquiries, GOM officials repeatedly noted that Sabbar's case was "special" and that, under Moroccan law, no passport could be issued because an arrest warrant against him remained pending. In a December 2009 meeting with PolCouns, Sabbar confirmed that the warrant was, indeed, the "official" explanation. However, he noted sardonically, he had presented himself on more than one occasion to authorities to demand that they either issue him a passport or execute the arrest warrant; until now, they had always politely declined to do either, he reported.

14. (SBU) On Feb. 17, Sabbar again asked authorities in Guelmin (a largely Sahrawi city that is actually north of the "border" between Western Sahara and internationally recognized Morocco) to issue him a passport. They refused, and Sabbar responded by launching a hunger strike in protest. On February 22, the GOM relented and granted Sabbar his travel document.

Why the Change of Heart?

15. (SBU) The GOM's rather abrupt decision to issue or return travel document took many Sahrawi activists by surprise. Our contacts in Laayoune, Dakhla and Guelmin reported receiving phone calls from the local police -- and, in some cases, visits from plain-clothes officers -- asking them to present themselves at regional Ministry of the Interior (MOI) offices to claim their passports and/or other identification papers. In some cases, authorities handed over new passports promptly based on previous applications (some of which had been pending for years), while in others the activists were told to re-apply. Laayoune-based authorities and Sahrawis have also reported having to wait for passports confiscated in Casablanca or elsewhere to be delivered to Western Sahara.

16. (C) Brahim Elansari, a Sahrawi activist closely associated with Aminatou Haidar's NGO the Collective of Sahrawi Human Rights Defenders (CODESA) told Poloff by phone that he expected at least three additional activists to receive their travel documents soon, bringing the number of resolved cases to 14. This leaves three cases remain unresolved, he noted. Interestingly, Elansari -- who is often a vehement critic of the GOM's efforts to prevent Sahrawis from traveling, noted that in these cases Moroccan officials have been uncharacteristically responsive. When asked why GOM officials experienced such a sudden change of heart, Elansari and others have alleged that the returns represented a political maneuver timed to coincide with the informal, UN-sponsored Western Sahara talks held February 9-10 in Westchester County under the auspices of the UNSG's Personal Representative Christopher Ross (Reftel D). The GOM expected the Polisario and Algerian delegations to criticize Morocco's human rights record in the territory, and sought to mitigate those attacks, Elansari claimed. A senior MFA official, for the GOM's part, stated simply that the return of the passports was the result of normal legal and administrative processes. MOI officials had denied or delayed delivery of the documents; the courts had ruled that those officials' decisions were incorrect and that the passports should be delivered; and the officials complied, he said.

First Stop: Tindouf

17. (C) A number of activists who received their new or renewed passports immediately scheduled trips to the Tindouf refugee camps in Algeria, Elansari said. Sabbar was among those who immediately traveled, ostensibly to see family members -- but also, it appears, to meet with Polisario leaders.

18. (C) COMMENT: We find credible our contacts' suggestion that the return of the passports might have been timed to influence the informal UN talks in Westchester County. Whatever the case, we see the return of the Sahrawis' documents as a significant, positive step. The Embassy had frequently raised the withholding of travel documents and other GOM limitations on Sahrawis' freedom of movement with government officials as part of our ongoing human rights conversations with the GOM, and we are pleased that, for whatever reason, they have begun to respond. What remains to be seen is how the GOM will respond to activists -- especially high profile independence advocates like Sabbar -- who openly traveled to Tindouf once they return. END COMMENT.

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